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SUBJECT: Russian TV paints Georgia-US plot in South Ossetia

11. (SBU) Summary: Russian broadcast coverage of the events in South Ossetia has placed the onus of the conflict on Georgia. We have noticed signs that some broadcast and electronic media outlets are distorting coverage to suggest that the conflict is part of a U.S./NATO plot against Russia. Broadcast coverage was devoted particularly to civilian casualties, allegedly inflicted by Georgian troops, and reports of Russian military activity within Georgian territory received little to no play. Reports of U.S., NATO, and other "unfriendly" (ex. Ukrainian, Baltic) involvement on the ground and support for Georgia are cited regularly. Statements by U.S. officials are covered but often accompanied by commentary making it clear Georgia is acting on behalf of U.S. interests. More alarmingly, false stories originating on the Internet have started to gain speed, claiming direct U.S. military involvement in the conflict. Overall, the Russian media has bent the truth at the same time it accuses the West of an anti-Russian bias. End summary.

Good vs. Evil

12. (SBU) Russian television has turned the conflict in South Ossetia into a classic good (Russia) versus evil (Georgia/U.S.) narrative. Rossiya, the state television channel, focused its coverage on the successful efforts of Russian and South Ossetian troops to beat back Georgian "aggression" and the civilian casualties inflicted by Georgian troops. Action shots of Russian tanks and North Ossetian "volunteers" rolling towards Tskhinvali are interspersed with pictures of wounded South Ossetian civilians, local residents hiding in their basements, and damaged and destroyed buildings. All civilian casualties are attributed to Georgian troops and little or no mention is made of Russian military action in Gori or other areas outside South Ossetia. Russian officials accusing Georgia of "genocide" against South Ossetia are thrown into news broadcasts and heavy emphasis was placed on the humanitarian crisis "created" by Tbilisi. These genocide accusations were accompanied by calls for South Ossetia to be severed from Georgia, as seen on the August 11th afternoon news broadcast on NTV, a domestic Russian TV channel.

Washington Pulling the Strings

13. (SBU) While Georgian president Mikhail Saakashvili is personified as being most responsible for the "crimes" committed in South Ossetia, both Rossiya and Channel One (another state-affiliated broadcaster) portrayed the U.S. as ultimately in control of the situation. Rossiya made a point of showing Saakashvili announce martial law in English, with the newscaster saying that Saakashvili was "awaiting" a statement from POTUS. Reports of up to four U.S. arms shipments per day to Georgia by the Russian website www.newsru.com have sprouted on the Internet. These reports later surfaced in the 1 PM news broadcast on NTV, a Russian domestic channel. In addition, online media announced over the August 9-10 weekend that U.S. soldiers were captured or killed in

South Ossetia; these reports have since disappeared by the afternoon of August 11, but Interfax quoted a South Ossetian hospital administrator as saying there were "foreigners" in his facility. Likewise, www.lenta.ru carried a report dated August 11 asserting that mercenaries from Ukraine and the Baltic states were fighting in South Ossetia on the Georgian side. While these stories have not gained much traction yet, their existence suggests that pro-Russian forces could be floating a trial balloon to see how the public responds to an anti-U.S., anti-foreigner campaign.

The Deck is Stacked Against Us!

¶4. (SBU) Russian media and officials have also been preoccupied with the "biased" Western broadcast reporting of the conflict. On August 10, Channel One and Rossiya both devoted large amounts of airtime to criticizing Western television coverage as being pro-Georgian and of turning a blind eye to the plight of South Ossetians who have suffered from Georgian aggression. In a Rossiya report on a BBC report of the Russian bombing of Gori, the commentator said the BBC's coverage "... suggests that should Russia get the upper hand over Georgia, other former Soviet republics may come under threat." Channel One noted on the night of August 10 that "His (Saakashvili's) statements and footage of what is described as Russia's bombing of Gori is what Western coverage is limited to. The goal is that no one in the West should have any doubts about who attacked whom in this conflict." If this commentary was not clear enough, the Russian news service Interfax quoted Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Karasin as saying "We would like Western television to broadcast not only pictures of Russian tanks... but also show the suffering of the Ossetian people, dead elderly people and children, villages razed to the ground and Tskhinvali lying almost in ruins. This would be objective reporting.

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The rest are politically-motivated versions."

¶5. (SBU) Russian print media, which reaches a smaller, but arguably more elite and influential audience, has published a wider range of coverage and opinions, some critical of Russian's actions. Like broadcast, the print press also highlighted the media's role covering the conflict: Business-oriented Vedemosti noted that, "Russian authorities allowed their Georgian opponents to win a blitzkrieg in the media ... Saakashvili gives several interviews on Western TV every day, depicting Russia as the aggressor. ...As soon as the attack on Tskhinvali began, Russian authorities should have sent foreign journalists to the conflict zone, under protection of the Russian military, and give the floor to OSCE representatives who would confirm the scale of destruction, and victims among civilians and peacekeepers. Instead, Russian TV told about Saakashvili's ties to the U.S."

¶7. (SBU) Comment: The message Russian television is sending its audience seems to be threefold: 1) We're fighting the good fight; 2) It's a Washington-Tbilisi conspiracy against Russia; and 3) We are not going to get a fair shake in the Western media. The goal seems to be to convince the Russian domestic audience that Russia is not only engaged in a noble struggle but that it had no choice because of Washington's and Saakashvili's machinations. The focus on the "unfair" reporting by Western media could be an attempt to inoculate the Russian public from future international condemnation of Russian activity in the region. Thus far, intentional plants or misrepresentation in the Russian media seems mostly confined to the Internet and wire services.

¶6. (SBU) Comment continued: The other interesting feature of Russian television reporting is its emphasis on the inhumane conditions allegedly created by Georgia. Accompanied by comments by South Ossetian and Abkhazian leaders that Georgia had forfeited its right to rule over South Ossetia, Russian media may be trying to lay the groundwork for the Russian government to make a comparison between Kosovo and South Ossetia with the argument that like Kosovo, South Ossetia should be severed from its current ruler out of humanitarian considerations. End comment.